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AP Literature & Composition

Composition: Title Analysis

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Fire and Ice

There are two parts to every word in the English language. Words have denotative meaning, which is the dictionary definition of the word, and a connotative meaning, which is the suggested meaning of a word apart from the thing it mainly describes. Poets can, and often do, use the English language to their advantage; they accurately and completely describe and address various topics in few words. “Fire and Ice” accomplishes that task. The denotative meaning of “Fire” is the phenomenon of combustion manifested in light, flame, and heat, and the denotative meaning of “Ice” is frozen water. However, these two words take on new life when identified by their connotative impressions. The combination of the connotative implications of “fire,” which is dangerous, explosive, and heat-filled, and “ice,” which is cold, hardening, and hate-filled, puts an emphasis on human relationships and the end of the world.

Looking at “Fire and Ice” literally, the first two lines state, “some say the world will end in fire, / some say ice” (1-2). The poem introduces world destruction in the first line. Connecting the destruction of the world to the various connotative meanings of “Fire” and “Ice” brings forth the idea that one way or another, the world is going to end. Aside from the negative connotations that “fire” and “ice” bring to the first two lines, the connotations of “end” reinforce that overall pessimistic attitude. The word “end” is frightening because it reflects doom and death. The negative aspects of “Fire,” such as desire to the point of corruption, present one way the world could “end.” The negative aspects of “Ice,” such as coldness and hate to the point of destruction, present an alternative way the world could “end.” Ultimately, fire and ice are not necessarily the only two ways in which the world can “end”; these two elements are merely representative of the idea that one way or another, the world will “end.”

Looking deeper into “Fire and Ice,” the ending world is like the ending of human relationships, and the elements of fire and ice are how humans get to this point. The brutality of fire becomes real when fire is compared to a burning desire; “from what I’ve tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire” (3-4). “Desire” with humans has the connotative meanings of naughty, dangerous, and even destructive. People in relationships have a burning passion and desire that can be dangerous and destructive. Because of “desire,” we created “fire.” On the other hand, the coldness of ice becomes real when ice is compared to destruction and hate; “I think I know enough of hate / to say that for destruction ice / is also great” (6-8). “Hate” is such a passionate word that draws so much negativity and downfall. Contrasted to and almost completely opposite of fire, ice reflects people’s cold hearts toward one another: “Hate” will tear down relationships in an instant.“Hate,” “ice,” and “great” are the three words brought together in lines six through eight. The massive implications of “great” combined with the coldness and negativity of “ice” and “hate” puts emphasis on not only the ending of relationships, but relationships ending horribly. Notice, the title of this poem is “Fire and Ice,” not “Fire or Ice.” These two words are not entirely disconnected. For example, someone, whether in a relationship or not, could passionately hate another person. The meaning of the title as a whole alludes to fire and ice, working together, leading to the eventual downfall of the relationship. Burning passion and desire can quickly, if left unchecked, lead to coldness and bitterness. Lines three and four bring to attention the general actions and wills of people throughout their relationships. If given the choice to live dangerously, which most of humanity does according to the poem, most people would choose to live passionately and full of desire.

Overall, “Fire and Ice” is a poem of destruction. Whether the destruction is of the world or in human relationships, it does not matter. In either situation, the battle is danger, and neither will end well. For the effect of the world ending, “Fire” and “Ice” are elements used to highlight that something, probably two opposites, will come and work together to destroy the world. With the faltering of relationships, “Fire” and “Ice” are necessary to bring forth the connotative meaning of destructive relationships throughout the poem. The connotative meanings of separate words in combination with these same words together as a whole create a significant influence on the overall meaning of the poem. Poems are usually the best choice of words in the best possible order. Such a small amount of words draws great insight.

Works Cited

Frost, Robert. “Fire and Ice.” Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. Eds. Thomas R. Arp, Greg Johnson. Boston Massachusetts, USA: Thomson/Wadsworth Publishing, 2006. 746.

